Recruiting and Placing Volunteers by Computer

VOLUNTEER PROGRAMS AND THE COMPUTER

By Connie Evener

When volunteer administrators get together, sooner or later the word "recruitment" comes up. How do you find that particular volunteer who meets your needs for skill, availability and interest? In Ohio's capital city, volunteer administrators go to the bank—the Columbus-Area Volunteer Skillsbank, that is.

Last fall, Rusty Groselle, volunteer service coordinator for the City of Columbus Volunteer Corps, began a search for someone to fill a slot on the group's advisory council. Groselle needed to round out the council's ranks with minority representation and administrative talent, so she went "shopping" at the Skillsbank.

Cecelia McGinnis, on the other hand, knew nothing about the Columbus Volunteer Corps. As an employee of the Youth Services Bureau, she had completed a Skillsbank registration form at the request of the Columbus Area Leadership Program. A topnotch administrator, McGinnis found the idea of serving on a board appealing.

The Columbus-Area Volunteer Skillsbank provided the missing link between McGinnis and the Columbus Volunteer Corps Advisory Council. Groselle calls this match a "shining example" of the Skillsbank's objective. Without that linkup, Groselle would have conducted her search along the usual channels, soliciting names from other members and contacts.

"But that way, you don't get everybody," she says. "The Skillsbank is a more accurate process and much more democratic."

A central clearinghouse for volunteers and agencies is not a new idea. Maintaining and searching the thousands of files generated, however, is and always has been the clerical equivalent of building pyramids. Whether you use three-ring binders or a knitting needle and punch cards, it is difficult and time consuming—and the criteria used for the matching process is, to be practical, severely limited. This is just the type of intricate, monotonous chore, however, at which computers excel.

Craig Mosier, the contract programmer and consultant who designed the Skillsbank's computerized system, explains.

"Essentially we're doing a clerical function," he said. "It's no different than if you were doing it by hand except that it's better organized, more accurate and faster."

Infinitely faster. Mosier estimates that an "easy" match takes the computer about 30 seconds to accomplish. A "hard" match— one that would require a search through every single entry on file—would, of course, take longer.

The Skills List

Ida Copenhaver, Skillsbank steering committee chair, stresses the importance of developing a thorough, but simple, registration form. "The most important part is the skills list," she says. "That's the key to the whole system."

Copenhaver, Mosier and the other members of the steering committee consulted with Volunteer Centers and VOLUNTEER—The National Center. In addition, they tested the list with local organizations until they were satisfied that the entries were specific, comprehensive and used a "vocabulary" that both volunteers and agencies would understand.

The final list includes over 500 different skills broken down into 26 categories. For example, the *Health-Medical Services* category takes in everything from acupuncture to vocational rehabilitation services; *Language* ranges from Braille to Vietnamese; and *Skilled Trades* begins with appliance repair and ends with welding. In short, no matter how specific an agency's needs or a volunteer's aptitude, neither will have difficulty pinpointing it within the skills list.

Another important consideration when identifying skills is proficiency. Is the volunteer a seasoned pro or an interested amateur? The Skillsbank registration form asks volunteers to rate their own proficiency level, ranging from 1 (no skill, but interested in learning about or gaining experience) to 5 (graduate or professional degree or equivalent experience).

"The Skillsbank is not a formal screening process," cautions Ellen Bernhard, manager of volunteerism development at CALLVAC Services, Columbus' Volunteer Center which houses the Skillsbank. "We don't check with employers or give typing tests. That sort of evaluation is left up to the agency. But, we have found that volunteers usually underrate rather than overrate themselves."

The registration form focuses on the volunteer's preference for involvement, from serving on boards, committees, etc., to working directly with clients. Volunteers are also asked with whom they prefer to

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work. From age to special needs group categories, the form provides 27 options. It also asks for information on availability, transportation requirements and demographics.

Victoria Lucas, development director for the Diocesan Child Guidance Center (DCGC), appreciates the thoroughness of the computer-generated volunteer profile.

"I know their age, where they live and work," she says. "I get an idea of their education, what they are interested in. It gives me a lot of insight into the person."

Registrants are asked to name organizations with which they are currently involved, when they would like to begin a new volunteer assignment, or if they want to go "on call" by waiting until an agency runs a matching request. "Nine times out of ten, they want to get involved immediately," says Bernhard.

The Needs File

That consistent and often burning desire for immediate involvement spurred development of the second Skillsbank component, the agency needs file.

"It was an afterthought, sort of the other side of the coin," Mosier said. "It gives the volunteer an active shot at getting placed immediately rather than sitting and waiting."

One of Lucas's most recent volunteer finds, Michael Westwood, decided that he wanted to be more active in the community. He contacted the United Way and was referred to the Skillsbank.

Before the agency needs file was added to the system, Westwood's application would have languished in the computer until the right agency ran its request.

But with the dual system, Westwood's registration was cross-checked immediately and the computer found that his skills, availability, etc., were compatible with the needs of DCGC.

Lucas admits that she never had considered a male volunteer for one of DCGC's night receptionist posts.
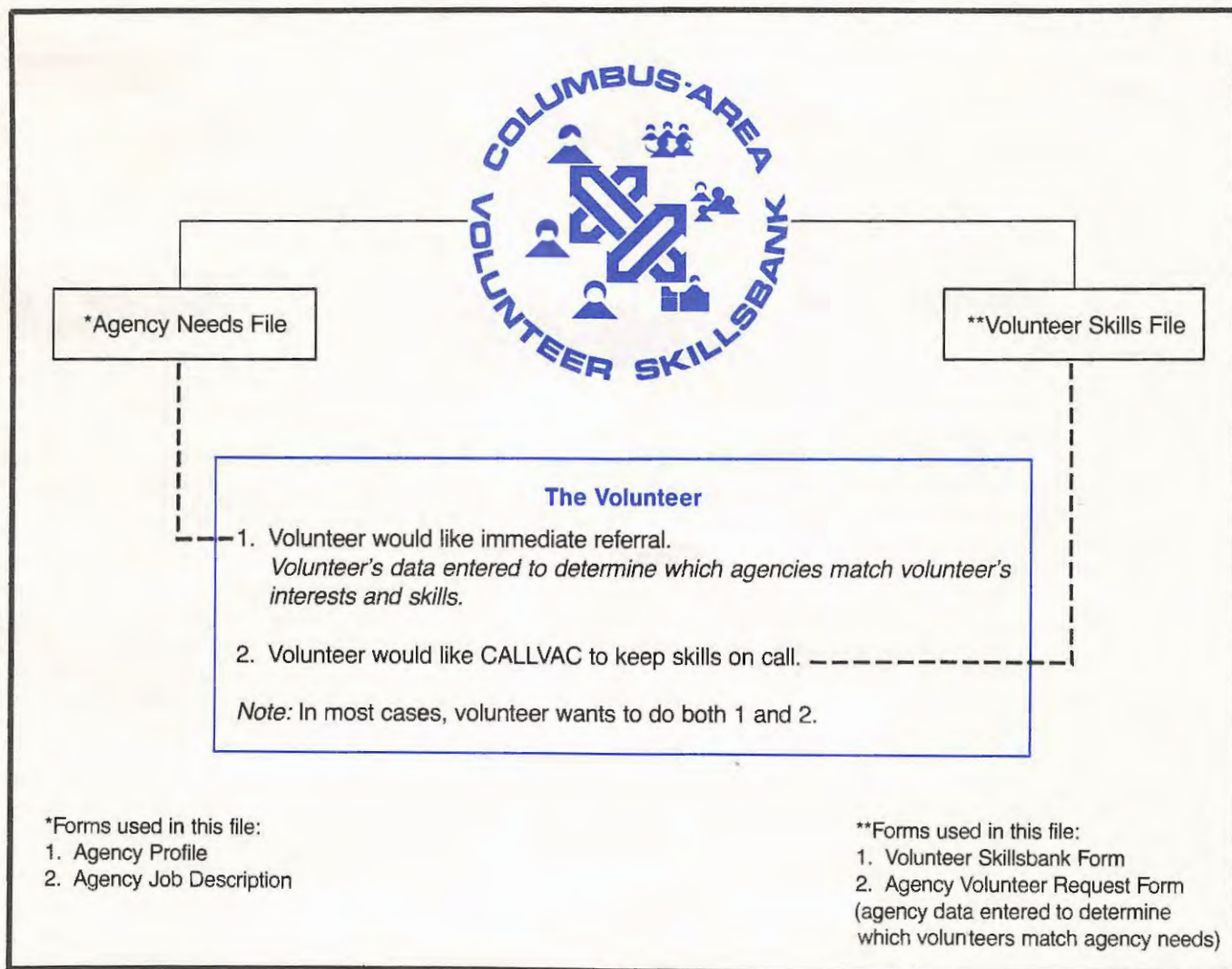
"I was being something of a female chauvinist," she admits. Westwood's profile, however, gave off such "good vibes," that she dropped her preconceived notions and called him for an interview.

Westwood, a full-time student/part-time customer service representative at a local bank, had heard of DCGC but didn't know they used volunteers. Now, his soothing baritone and amiable demeanor calms bank customers by day and nervous teenagers every Thursday evening.

Another Skillsbank "find" for Lucas was Marcia Huhn, who illustrates the satisfaction that a well-tailored placement can generate not only for the agency but the volunteer. Since DCGC deals with a high percentage of crisis calls, Lucas's request for referral assistants was quite specific.

"This was just perfect for me," says Huhn, who had some crisis counseling experience. "I'm going to school part-time and trying to decide what area to pursue my master's degree in. This is really helping me decide if I want to go into counseling or social work."

COLUMBUS·AREA VOLUNTEER SKILLSBANK

*Agency Needs File

**Volunteer Skills File

The Volunteer

1. Volunteer would like immediate referral.
   Volunteer's data entered to determine which agencies match volunteer's interests and skills.

2. Volunteer would like CALLVAC to keep skills on call.

Note: In most cases, volunteer wants to do both 1 and 2.

*Forms used in this file:
1. Agency Profile
2. Agency Job Description

**Forms used in this file:
1. Volunteer Skillsbank Form
2. Agency Volunteer Request Form (agency data entered to determine which volunteers match agency needs)

The Benefits

The benefits of locating a perfect match and doing it quickly are obvious, but Bernhard reports that volunteers and agencies are gaining other advantages as well.

"We've found that many agencies, after looking through the list of skills, are realizing that it is possible to find volunteers who can serve in capacities that they never dreamed possible," she said. "After a Skillsbank workshop, agencies who have made five requests suddenly send us another 15 or 20."

The process forces agencies to assess their needs more closely.

"So often they ask for 'the enthusiastic fun-loving volunteer who likes to work with children'," says Bernhard, "but now they are realizing the importance of a *real* job description." On the other hand, volunteers are beginning to recognize that there is a full spectrum of opportunities. Helping other people is a laudable motive, but helping other people by doing exactly what you enjoy or do best is much more satisfying and sustaining.

The Skillsbank also gives people new to volunteerism the opportunity to break in without anxiety.

"There are people out there who are willing to volunteer, but they just don't know how to get plugged in," says Copenhaver, "and then you have those people who are constantly called." By spreading the base, the Skillsbank not only attracts new investments, but also keeps perennial investments from being overdrawn and losing interest.

And for the special event or temporary assignment, the Skillsbank provides a portfolio of blue chip volunteers willing to serve for a day or a month. This potential is especially appealing to corporations.

"Some corporations are now administering volunteer programs among their employees," says Bernhard, who dubs those programs "mini-VACS."

By registering employees with the Skillsbank, they have convenient access to skills needed by an agency who wants to involve the corporation on a team basis for a special event or program.

The same concept is available to agencies, too. By registering their own volunteers, they can quickly locate those people who have the skills they are seeking. Often agencies are not aware that a volunteer serving in one capacity has abilities that they need in another area. An added option with this "special account," or sub-file, is the computer's deftness at cranking out mailing or telephone lists and rosters.

With either the corporate or organizational sub-file, the registrant can also be added to the main Skillsbank base and made available to the entire community, or he/she can maintain exclusivity.

"Forming a computerized skillsbank is not a one-group process," says Copenhaver, nor is it a short-term project. For the past five years, The Junior League of Columbus, CALLVAC Services, United Way, Columbus Area Leadership Program and the Columbus Volunteer Corps have worked together to get funding, set up the data base, "de-bug" and streamline the system.

CALLVAC's cover letter that is sent to interested volunteers with Skillsbank registration form.

They took a deliberate approach, honing and polishing along the way. They tested each step, using members of the coalition as guinea pigs.

Mosier can cite numerous examples of that refinement process. "For example, since the first person listed in the system would always be the first to be matched, we set up a system using a random factor," Mosier said. "Now, each search is begun at a different point in the file, which effectively spreads the chance of someone being involved in a match or 'hit' every time a fairly non-specific request is run."

Sensitive to computer phobia, Mosier is anxious to allay worries about privacy within the system.

"This is a totally stand-alone system," he says. "Because there is no modem or communication with other computers, the only people who have access to our data are those who have access to our offices and know how to run the program."

Judy Leach, CALLVAC's assistant director of administrative and technical services, says that the menu-driven system "is really easy for both staff and volunteers." Leach instituted a four-session training program for her volunteers with time in between sessions to "play" with the data bases and computer.

By making a "practice" copy of the Skillsbank software, Leach gave volunteers the opportunity to experiment without apprehension.

"That's really a big concern when someone is just beginning," says Leach, "but by 'playing' with the system they find that they can't hurt it."

The Columbus-Area Volunteer Skillsbank is currently operated by one work-a-teer (head "teller" Jody Roach, who loves the variety of working on the computer, then talking to volunteers and agencies on the phone) and several volunteers.

Costs and Fees

Although personnel costs are minimum, expenses like postage, printing, telephone, etc., still mount up. In an effort to balance the budget, the Skillsbank is signing up paid subscribers.

Volunteers are never charged, nor are agencies who wish only to list their needs. A limited subscription entitles the holder to conduct unlimited searches and to take advantage of the standing request (a regular search for people to fill on-going needs).

A full subscription adds the sub-file service (with unlimited searches of that sub-file) and mailing lists. Fees range from $5 per search for non-members to $75 per year for the full subscription package. (Corporations pay $1 per registrant.) The fee structure was constructed carefully to make the service available and affordable to all agencies, from small, financially strapped organizations to large agencies with more flexible budgets.

The Skillsbank Steering Committee is also looking for ways to recoup the initial investment. Since the system can be installed or modified to run on just about any computer system, they would like to talk with other agencies interested in instituting a high-tech, low-cost volunteer placement system.

For further information, contact Columbus-Area Volunteer Skillsbank, c/o CALL-VAC Services, 370 S. Fifth St., Columbus, OH 43215, (614) 221-6766.♥